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ABSTRACT

The language performance and experiences of four eleventh grade Canadian vocational students were examined over six weeks in four individual interviews and four group discussion sessions. Additional data were collected by observing the students in their English classes and work situations. These case studies revealed the following: student language abilities varied according to mode and situation and their language difficulties were less apparent in group discussions and work situations, where they revealed an awareness of both the heuristic and communicative functions of language. The students did not lack inherent language facility, but their intentions and expectations about writing were misguided by the kind of writing they most often did in school (transactional) and the kinds of responses their teachers gave to that writing (negative, overemphasizing mechanics). Students' self-concepts about their writing abilities led them to expect little from their writing; and expecting little, they accomplished little. The implications from these case studies concern the needs to broaden students' intentions of school language, to be aware of the student's own language and the role this language plays in learning, and to balance attention to language surface features with attention to the content. (RL)

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The Language

of

Vocational Students

by

Anna Kae McIvor

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Teaching vocational, or remedial, English students is a great challenge. In order to alleviate some of the more frustrating aspects of this challenge teachers need to understand the relationships between language and learning. They need also to understand the language performance and behaviours particular to those students who have been regarded as less able in language in school.

Recently, I have been involved in research which examined the language use of a selected group of vocational English students. This study grew out of personal interest and experience in teaching vocational English students and from study of a recently articulated body of language theory that makes investigation of the processes of students' language both accessible and fruitful. This theory presents a developmental view of language--one that is predicated on the interrelatedness of thought, language and learning. Essentially, the study was based on this theory as it has been articulated and synthesized by James Britton. In this context language behaviour is best understood within a framework that accounts for the social and psychological functions of an individual.

Since the study was concerned with vocational students I was led by Britton's theories (particularly as they are influenced by the philosophy of Michael Polanyi and the psychology of George Kelly) to consider intriguing and--admittedly--not yet clearly defined relationships and theories about the development of a

concept of self, its relation to language and the role of education in influencing children's concepts of themselves as learners or more specifically as language users.

Purpose of the Study

It was the intention of my study to examine the language performance and experiences, and investigate some of the processes of language, of a group of students who by their placement in a vocational English program have been judged to have difficulties with language in school. Specifically, and in keeping with the growing number of successful studies in education that have preceded from this perspective of language theory, the study used a descriptive, case study approach and qualitative analysis to explore three principle questions:

1. What is the school history in language of these students?
2. What are the characteristics of the students' present language performance.
3. What are the students' perceptions of themselves as learners in relation to the particular demands and expectations in English in the school?

Procedure and Design of the Study

The study involved four students, two boys and two girls from a grade eleven, non-academic English class.

The data were collected from a number of sources over a six-

week period during which time I met with the students in four individual sessions and four group sessions. During the first three individual sessions (three for each student) the students were tape-recorded as they composed orally and wrote. The fourth individual session, through an interview format, elicited information about the students' school language experiences. The four group sessions involved the students in discussions of a variety of literary selections of varying degrees of difficulty. Additional data were collected through observation of the students in their regular English classes and through observation and taping of the students in work situations.

Analysis of the Data

A. The Historical Perspective

In order to present an historical perspective of the students' school language experiences the data were considered from three points of view:

1. The teachers' views of these students as inferred from examination of the students' past records and the teachers' written responses to the students' past writing samples.
2. The students' views as determined primarily by individual interviews.
3. The students' available past writing which--to aid interpretation--was categorized according to Britton's language model.

In respect to the teachers' views it was apparent that (with the exception of one student) the students were all regarded as having had some difficulties with language throughout their schooling. However, there were differences in emphasis of the nature of their problems. For example, weakness in language skills and slowness in work habits were the dominant considerations in one student's work. Shyness and amount of effort were those remarked on in another's. Four characteristics were common to the marking of the student's work:

1. The marking greatly emphasized the mechanical errors of the students' writing.
2. Virtually no acknowledgement was made of effective mechanical or syntactic elements in the students' work.
3. The relatively few remarks that concerned content were most often broad assessments ("good") and were indiscriminately applied to the whole piece.
4. There were very few positive comments. Those that there were pertained to content, and were almost exclusively general.

In respect to the students' views three major considerations arose. First, many of the students' comments indicated that they may perceive English in school in a limited way. This was well illustrated by the comment one student made while discussing one of his writing samples. "I guess I got good here because I just wrote what she wanted all the way across."

Next, all of the students had definite ideas about what they would like to see in the work in English classes. The criteria common to the group and expressed in their order of importance was: a) the work should be interesting, b) it should involve group activities, and c) it should have variety and some apparent value or purpose.

And last, the students' interviews revealed many examples that suggested a possible relationship between their views of English and their self-concepts as language users. For example, two of the students expressed a dislike for anything in English that they found difficult or threatening, such as reading aloud or participating in whole-class discussions. Also, most of the students' specific recollections about school concerned situations they had found threatening (a family move, for instance), and/or involved occasions of failure (a history of extreme difficulty in spelling and its subsequent repercussions).

The students' past writing revealed many considerations but space limits discussion of such to two:

1. The vast majority of writing demanded of the students required them to operate in a participant role and a transactional mode. (Their writing samples were not limited to work done in their English classes but also included other subject areas such as social and science.)
2. The students all had some writing difficulties; however,

the difficulties varied according to the type of writing task in which they were engaged. For the most part, it seemed that writing done in an expressive or exploratory mode showed greater writing facility. Two brief excerpts from one student's writing illustrate this point.

Culture in General

The materials they had were forming, sometimes wild animals, and they had lots of food.

1.
Yes, there is rituals connected with birth, coming to the adulthood, marriage or death.

4. The leaders were sort of like the people that made the laws. weak answer!

2.

3. Yes, they do, know how would they get (frie) good if they (diffrent) carry on tracle.

My Life

My life was a pleasure to live.
Until, a thought deep down and on top.
That I wasn't a little girl any more,
I was GROWN UP!

I guess I should start over
Because how I'm the littlest of them all.
Maybe my feelings and thoughts should be mine.
No one seems to understand me.
I will be a (quite) and shy person.
I will be quite to the people I know.
I will have to change not for myself.
But for people who don't understand me.

I will soon learn to worship the other sex.
Although I wish not too, it would be best.
I will learn to let people speak first.

I promise to my self that I will change.
But it's my LIFE!

B. The Present Perspective

In addition to attempting to develop an historical perspective the students' present language performance was also considered. This performance was pursued qualitatively from three general perspectives:

1. from their talk and writing in oral composing,
2. from their talk in group discussions, and
3. from their use of language in a work situation.

Essentially, observations based on the oral composing procedures would seem to indicate that the students' perceptions of writing were limited. Their writing was characterized by: a) a readiness to begin writing, b) a lack of written pre-planning, c) dependence on interpretation of teacher expectations as to what form or context was used, d) reliance on the narrative or reporting modes for structure, e) little overt attention to planning or mechanical and structural concerns, f) few successful revision tactics, and g) evidence of a large background of specific experience not utilized in writing.

Observation of the most distinctive features of the students' performance in group discussions raised two main considerations. First, the students demonstrated a considerable facility in talk. They were able to get at, and in many cases explore, the essential meaning in all of the literary selections. There were differences, of course, among the students' levels of performance in the groups,

but these differences were generally relative to the differences perceived in the levels of their writing abilities. Second, the students' language performance in group discussion emphasized the differences between their writing and talking, and in so doing emphasized the role of talk in the English classroom. More specifically, it could be seen that the enabling features of group collaboration allowed for added extension and depth in expression of ideas. The flexibility of speech provided opportunity for on-going shaping, organizing and reformulating of thought; and the reciprocity of speech enabled the students to take advantage of immediate feedback to modify or reshape their messages.

Perhaps the most revealing features of the students' language performance appeared in examination of the students' use of language in a work situation. (Work situation was defined as situations outside the usual academic school context.)

The three students involved all showed considerable mastery of the subject language of their working environments which were: mechanics, beauty culture, and drama.

In these situations the students displayed significant awareness of audience needs in their language use. Effective language use demands that a speaker be able to shape and reshape the language he uses to meet the varying levels of understanding and need he encounters with his audience. He must understand the (often non-verbal) promptings and responses he receives from his audience and

make the appropriate choices from a number of options. For example, in the following excerpt as Bob explains how a battery tester works he moves from a technical explanation about bolts and amps to a simple account about load, and finally to a concrete example regarding possible complications in winter. He then reverts to technical terms (perhaps revealing how difficult it is to separate language from the concepts it represents), and attempts to illustrate the apparatus through explanations of function and examples of effect.

> This is a battery tester. It will tell you how many amperes your battery, or how many volts your battery's putting out, and then how many amperes. Like, what it does, it loads your battery as if you're starting it--hey?--but it does it at about four times what you're starting it, and sees how long it will put out before it dies. And--like--if it will put out for, you know, so many minutes, well then it's all right. But, if it will only put out for a minute, like that, then you should change it, because you're going to have problems in the winter starting it.
>
> The amps--the amps are how many--how many volts. Well, the amps is how much goes through, and this is how much power it has--hey? This (pointing to dials on machine) is how much push it has and this is how much power it has. Like, with volts--you can have 20,000 volts and it won't hurt you. It will just give you a shock--hey? You can have 20,000. 20,000 volts and no amps, will just give you a shock. Twenty thousand volts and say 100 amps, will kill you. But you don't get 100 amps in a battery. You get 100 amps from--ah--you don't get 100 amps in a car. You get 100 amps in, say, if you touch a high-voltage wire outside.

In demonstrating an ability to accommodate his listener's very minimal grasp of the subject area, Bob shows that he has an aware-

ness, even if unconscious, of the tenor of discourse, that is, of the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the degree of formality of his utterance.

In all of the students' work language there were clear indications that intention was operating. Not only does it seem (to use Polanyi's words) that intention has released tacit powers, it would seem also to have given the students a confidence to tackle further problems. For example, in a beauty parlour setting the comments with which one student greeted her client demonstrated her appreciation of the appropriate register and conventions of language needed in this situation. "May I take your coat? . . . This way please. . . . Would you care for coffee?" At a later point, in response to my comment, "this is all very nice", Rita answered, "Yes, well our instructor is concerned that we all treat our patrons properly." It is very likely that intention gave Rita an impetus for learning this language. Perhaps more precisely one might speculate that intention provided the impetus for building a bridge between personal and impersonal language, while gradual experience in encountering and using the language enabled her to cross it.

Conclusions

Although the analysis and findings of this study are within themselves of interest, what may be of particular importance is what may be behind these findings. It is with a strong awareness

of the limited context from which they are drawn and with a sense of tentativeness about immediate general applicability of them that the following conclusions are offered.

A. Performance - Competence

It seemed that the language ability of each of the four students could not be characterized simply as being consistently within a narrow range of performance. It varied according to mode and situation. Overall, their talk indicated a higher level of language competence than their writing did. Further, the quality of the language performance of the students in this study was seen to vary according to the nature of the language situation in which they found themselves. All of the students, though less so in one case, were seen to have some difficulties in writing. However, in some language modes (namely, the expressive) their difficulties were less apparent. With respect to talk, in a group discussion they had even fewer difficulties and exhibited an ability to explore essential meaning in difficult literary selections. In a work situation they had no apparent language difficulties. In this environment the students revealed an awareness of both the heuristic and communicative functions of language.

B. Intention

It is commonly assumed that vocational English students will exhibit a restricted performance in some or many areas of language development. In this study, I concluded that this would relate to

only a narrow portion of the students' language performance and that it is valid only in a limited sense. The real problem is not the students' inherent language facility, but rather it is the intention and expectation they have regarding school language, especially writing. To the degree that this exists one might surmise from all the data of the study that, in respect to writing, a pattern something like this may operate. First, most of the students' writing is transactional, written for teacher as examiner. That is, it serves primarily an evaluative function; thus, students see writing as serving only this end. Second, the way in which teachers generally respond to the writing, granting the difficulties under which they may operate, focuses on surface features and correctness of surface elements. As a result students acquire even a more limited view of the purposes and functions of writing. Because in their view content seems less valued, they themselves become concerned with surface features. However, the very act of placing primary focus on these may inhibit their competence in them.

Students will not attempt to tackle the difficulties inherent in writing unless they see a value in it. Too often in their writing the students have been left unaware of the many factors which in any situation outside school would help them to plan the form, content and style of what they write. Not only has overemphasis on this type of writing limited the students' chances to

sort out for themselves their own understanding of what they are learning; it has robbed them of the chance to see that such learning is a function of writing.

C. The Importance of Self-Concept

A preliminary consideration of global self-concept was of limited value in revealing insights into the relationship between the students' language behaviour and self-images. However, investigation of their self-concepts as language learners and users was revealing in this respect. In the latter instances, the students saw themselves as failing to measure up, in some or many respects, to the standards of correctness which in their perceptions comprised a view of writing. The results of this view were twofold: the students seemed to conclude from this failure that they had nothing worthwhile to say and they did not appear to be willing to take risks in their writing. A cyclical relationship had developed--one which emphasized the relationship between self-concept and intention. They saw themselves as inadequate writers as a result of teachers' emphases on their surface errors; thus they were led to expect little of their writing; and expecting little, they accomplished little.

Implications - for study and for the classroom

A most obvious implication arising from this study concerns a need to broaden students' intentions of school language,

especially writing. In many instances it appears that what students perceive as school language interferes with their discovering what writing is and what it can do. If one considers that a teacher's response must largely determine how a student will arrive at perceptions of his own work and expectations of what is required of him, and if one recognizes that the teacher's response is intimately bound up with his intention and that, in general, educational success is measured by the degree of conformity to school values, one realizes that in many instances a student's thwarted intention is almost predetermined. We must try to find means of avoiding such consequences.

Another implication concerns the need to be aware of a student's own language and the role this language plays in his learning. Making knowledge one's own requires the chance to formulate and reformulate ideas in language in which one is most at ease, and that allows one to accommodate "old" knowledge to the "new". To this end schools need to encourage further use and investigation of the "expressive" language mode as a matrix for further language development. In this context too, we cannot ignore the apparent strengths and competence of students' talk, particularly in areas of interest and concern to them.

Related to these, but considered particularly in the light of intention is a final implication. There is a need to balance emphasis of concern regarding the surface features of students'

writing with a position of concern and response for what they are trying to say. In so doing one shifts the emphasis on product to a concern with the cognitive developmental processes of students. Response to written work matters. It is a main point of contact between teacher and students and is very important in shaping this relationship and the students' attitudes toward writing.

To achieve a proper balance in response to students' writing, one must reduce or remove the evaluative aspect in marking. In so doing one is helping to broaden students' perceptions of writing; for to be adventurous, to be willing to take risks, to open the doors to discovery, students must be free and secure. Free to explore, and secure in the knowledge that they can make mistakes without penalty. This is what Carl Rogers calls psychological freedom and safety; and this is also the learning climate that we, as teachers, need to provide for students--especially for those students who may well have negative concepts of themselves as language users.

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